

KONSTANTIN
SIMONOV

*Friends
and
Foes*

A BOOK OF POEMS

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CONTENTS

MEETING IN CANADA	15
RED AND WHITE	18
THE TIGER	23
ELLIPSES	26
SAVAGES	29
SACCO AND VANZETTI STREET	32
A BALLAD ABOUT THREE SOLDIERS	36
NIGHT FLIGHT	40
THE GERMAN	45
EXPLANATION OF AN ERROR	48
MY FRIEND SAMED VURGUN'S SPEECH	
AT A LONDON DINNER	52
NO!	57
WINTER PALACE IN TOKIO	60
NAVAL BASE AT MAIZURU	63
FRONTLINE HOUSE	67
NIGHT BEFORE IMMORTALITY	72
RED SQUARE	75
OUR SONG	78

Meeting in Canada

Onto the stage I stepped. Of war
The hall held echo; hushed and chill
It lay, its silence like the still
That, tense, awaits the gun's first roar.
We^{*}knew: a battle was in store—
The three front rows, benumbed with rage,
Had come to hiss us off the stage
In declaration, mute, of war.
I saw them there, two steps away,
Their faces smug with self-conceit,
The chewing jaws in full display,
The spiteful grins that held deceit;
Hands thrust in pockets, hats awry,
Each man sprawled idly in his place. . . .
So that's the foe that we're to face!
The hall looms dark; for all of me,
The eyes of friends I can't descry—

Yet they have come, yet they are here,
Not in the front, but very near,
Out in the back, that's where they'd be,
They must be there, it must be so!
If only like a beacon light
Their eyes cold shine to let me know!
It's dark beyond that third grim row.
The first row smokes at me—a blight
Sent in my face; its acrid sting
Bites eyes and nose; undaunted, I
Begin my speech; the first words ring
Like a command to do or die—
They're "Russia, Stalin, Stalingrad!"
The three front rows, in silence clad,
Start, for a murmur in the rear
Grows louder now, for all to hear.
It windlike sweeps across the hall,
And like a giant waterfall,
Cascade of ever mounting cheer,
With mighty roar comes surging near.
It's well past midnight, yet despite
So late an hour the meeting's on,
And all rise up to sing as one,
With voices glad, with faces bright.
The three front rows are very still,

Lest there be trouble if they speak;
Their very silence shows how weak
Are those who spurn the common will.

.

There still remains to add, I find,
A word or two: whenever those
Who war incite, their plans disclose,
That hall is what I keep in mind,
The hall!

And not the three front rows.

Red and White

It was a day I'd looked ahead to, for
A trip to Harlem had been promised me--
A running leap across the town and o'er
A chasm unbridged, a wound eternally
Touched up and iodized, but never healed
By feeling tales that filled one with unrest,
By John Brown's death, by social battlefield,
By Beecher-Stowe, and Lincoln, and the rest.
We lived in a hotel of some pretensions
(And that's a fact that cannot be omitted),
Where guests receive the advertised attentions,
And only persons of note are ever admitted;
Where an advertisement in large typed print
 apprizes
The world at large of those inside residing,
And thus the rest of humankind deriding,

Whom no hotel announcement canonizes;
No ordinary mortals were thus listed—
Celebrities in droves—a chosen public,
Two kings of that queer breed, still in
 existence,
Officials from each patronized republic,
Three presidents from satellite Brazil,
And last, not least, notorious Mr Churchill.

And there into that shrine that let us in
With undisguised and ill-controlled chagrin,
Its horrified disgust in full display,
To be ~~my~~ guide through Harlem on that day
A Negro woman. .

 was . . .

 about to come.

I made the commonplace suggestion
That we go down to meet the lady,
But my translator had an answer ready
Impossible! Out of the question!

He then went on to say a misconception,
However absurd, might then arise that I
Was loath to let a Negress into my
Hotel room—the ordinary bourgeois assumption.

‘But I am Soviet!’— “That’s an added reason,
Then she’ll be sure to come upstairs, you’ll see,
To sense with grief-filled heart, bescarred with
 pain and treason,
How much a friend a Soviet man can be.”

And I obediently waited
An hour or more, the woman who came in
Was dignified and quiet, middle-aged,
With graying hair, calm smile, and stubborn chin.

The doorman made no move to help her enter,
She ran the gauntlet, faced the hostile front;
This quiet little, tight-lipped Negro teacher
Met, unafraid, the mute hotel’s affront.

The operator, shocked to the very core,
Made sure that only we were in the lift.
And at a speed inordinately swift
Delivered us nonstop to bottom floor.

Filled with a hubbub stale as it was mirthless,
The vestibule lay solemn, smoke-infested,
Its myriad chairs, with frigid patience vested,
Wore looks of expectation, blank and careless.

At least that's how it always was.
And yet this time
 it gaped at us.

It gaped, necks craned. in many-eyed dismay.
It gaped, cigars suspended, openmouthed,
As at a bursting bomb an inch or so away.
Or someone in the street with no clothes on.

We two were white of skin, the woman coloured,
And yet in hue the closest of them all
Both to myself she was and to my comrade
Among the crowd
 within that alien hall.

Aims linked, we marched to meet its fusillade,
The stare of eyes like rifles cocked and levelled.
And like a slap across their jaws repellent,
Through lines of Whites three Reds —our way
 we made.

Fists clenched so tight the skin went taut
 and fallow,
I felt with every pore as sharply as a cramp—
There's no such thing as black, or brown, or yellow.

But only Reds—our own,
 and Whites—the other camp.
The sort of Whites one chances on all over,
In any land, on any continent,
The kind my generation will remember
From childhood days. In no way different.

The kind who'll know a fate as just and real
As that of hordes forced years ago to flee
When Red battalions drove them from Crimea
And flung them from the shore into the sea!

The Tiger

I thought today of Frisco and its harbour,
The banquet on the twentieth floor, the note
That put me on my guard against my neighbour,
One of the guests around the table d'hôte.

A tiger stuffed into a russet suit,
The man in question—owner of three papers
And local press chief, cut no tigrish capers
And wore a mien unruffled and astute.
But in the glitter of his tooth-paste smile,
The furry paw with claws well-trimmed, the bile
That coloured green his eye, the hungry leer
The hidden tiger early did appear.

The talk we had might, doubtless, have suggested
A sealed-up pack of razor blades, each blade

Put by for future use—it was so staid,
So thin of edge, with such sobriety vested.

Our duel, polite, went on all night, he eager
Held to the razor's edge of courtesy, but less
Was there in him of poise, more of the tiger
That crouches in the jungles of the press;
No wonder that at sight of red he came
On all four paws, incensed, in quest of game!

Despite the skill with which we two averted
All danger rocks, each underwater reef,
We finished speaking with untold relief,
And rose foes manifest, though not asserted.

.
And yet months later I recalled that night,
A mem'ry unspectacular and fleeting,
Was it because before that casual meeting
I saw how fate did such as he requite?
Their cards played out, brought finally to bay,
The captive tigers faced a man-made jury.
And, crushing ampules with their teeth in fury
(The verdict published), they were led away.

New, young, and brazen, much like them was he,
When, burning down the Reichstag, full elated.

They tried Georgi Dimitrov ruthlessly
For something they themselves had perpetrated.

The Reichstag of America's on fire,
My dinner-table friend an arsonist,
And as the flames mount higher and ever higher,
His name with growing bitterness is hissed.
When to make just return for every crime
Before the people's court they stand on trial,
He'll be among them marching in in file --
No shock for those who knew him in his prime!

Ellipses

A LETTER TO A COMRADE

IN NEW YORK

My nameless friend, how's life beneath the Statue
Of Liberty, out in the spangled States?
Who dogs your steps, your every movement watches,
At every door and every corner waits?

What new-found list includes your name, accusing
Of treachery an honoured citizen,
Twice wounded veteran of war abusing
Who wears a Cross for valour at Ardennes?

I wonder if on 105th, off Broadway,
You still have lodgings in that corner place,
Or if, in quest of work, a hobo on a highway,
From Albany to Washington you pace. . . .

Whose pallid nose against the door glass presses
When from a booth you make a call? Who plaits
A web of libel round you? Who represses
The liberty of all four dozen states?

They may have jailed you e'en, for a duration,
But left alone, your mother sheds no tear—
Not one complaint, request, or supplication—
A Communist's old mother knows no fear.

I long for news of you. Do not compel me
To wonder and to worry from afar;
I ask for nothing but a sign to tell me
That you are free. if free, in fact, you are.

A homing pigeon?—No. Too far. Don't fail
To send a novel or a journal, though, and, mind,
That on some page four letters with your nail
F-r-e-e—are thinly underlined.

The simple fact that you've a friend in Russia
Your New York foes find argument enough
To bait, to slander you, to treat you rough
In an attempt thus to defeat and crush you.

We're—Communists. No secret this. A fact.
They're—Fascists. Yet again no secret. Fact.
They openly declared that we're at war,
For all the world to know. So why add more?
Let but your name stay secret and intact.

To learn it from my letter would delight them.
They want their suppositions verified;
But when I print my poem, just to spite them.
Your name behind ellipses I shall hide.

You love New York, its every line and feature,
Its bridges, avenues, the Hudson and the Bay,
The way it is, the way it stands today,
But even more you love the city's future —

A future it desires, one it must strive for,
What certainly one day it will become.
A door into tomorrow, not a vault door.
. A city you will build for men to come!

Beneath your new address, in posting you a letter
To this New York, a newer town and better,
My pen your far-famed name will firmly trace
Where silently I now ellipses place.

Savages

No loneliness is greater than
The vast Atlantic deep to span,
When cannonlike the heaving waves
Roar ceaseless while the ocean raves,
And strangers' voices with a twang
Come from the bar in hoarse harangue.

As in a prison yard of stone
I make the round of decks alone,
For seven days, my hands clenched tight.
I follow out the tedious rite,
While, querulous, creaks our vessel old,
With Europe stuffed from deck to hold.
No Europe this of the Maquis,
Nor yet the one that liberty
Defended on a battlefield
And chose to die, but not to yield.

The one on board preferred to stay
For seven years in U.S.A.,
To grind an organ in the street,
To shine the shoes of the élite,
To cringe and stoop, their favour crave,
And be their watchdog and their slave.
It's '46, I'm bound for home.
No hired murderer in Rome
Has fired as yet his ruthless shot
In strict compliance, now well known,
With Marshall's plan (or, is it, plot),
Not then made public though full-blown;
Behind the bars is Schacht as yet;
Jules Moch, the socialist, does let
His mind in private life but dwell
On tear-gas bomb and cannon shell.

Too early yet to be aware
Of rising trouble in the air
I get no inkling as I scan
The lounging passengers in sight
That that passé and wan old man,
Wrapped in a frayed-edged blanket, might
Some few months hence turn out to be
Up to his old-time perfidy,

The post of minister attain,
And la belle France sell out again;
That that smooth squab, bound for Turin,
His bags beside him on the floor,
Might there a hangman's laurels win,
Just as he did some years before;
Or that the fop, for Athens bound,
Out with his dog to get some air,
Might slaughter thousands there, all round,
And not so much as turn a hair;
That on the stern....

But this will do.

We're still in '46, the ship
Cuts through the waves, a homeward trip,
And nothing more. Why this ado
When three men meet on board: a Greek,
Out for a turn around the deck,
A sweating man with visage sleek,
And in a chair a green-faced wreck....

No lonelier lot on land or sea
Than this—midst savages to be.

Sacco and Vanzetti Street

The uproar in our town, the dawn-flushed sky,
The gathering in school—there's no forgetting,
When Boston jurors sentenced them to die -
The antifascists Sacco and Vanzetti.

To make the fascists pay for crime so grave
We, Pioneers, vowed then before our fathers;
In honour of the dead their names we gave
To streets in our home city and in others.

With lapse of time the street plate wore away,
New houses were put up; and yet, commanding
The corner view, our schoolhouse to this day
On Sacco and Vanzetti Street is standing.

Time passes. 1945. Berlin
In ruins.... And a Russian soldier's hand
On smoke-stained scraps of paper folded thin
Scrawls Sacco and Vanzetti—home address,
The years of war brought no forgetfulness.

That far address was lighted by a glow—
The Chancellery of Germany aflame....
A Russian street.... Two words Italian.... No,
Those Boston jurymen had best not hope that e'er
The Sacco and Vanzetti we'll rename—
Its sacred name the street shall always bear!

. . . *
I thought of this first when in Italy, we
Flew high o'er its mountains descrying below
The fires of the early rebellions, their glow
A promise of hope and of freedom to be.
If living—Vanzetti and Sacco. I knew,
Those cliffs would be scaling, wherever the blaze
Of partizan warfare swift action betrays,
Guerrillas in battle for destinies new!

In fallen Berlin, city silent, half-dead, .
I thought of those two once again, having heard

That one, Mussolini, once hated and feared,
Was hanged by a people to liberty wed.
Vanzetti and Sacco, if living, would not
By danger be daunted, and, certainly, they
Would bring 'mong the first the enslaver to bay
And see that he met his well-merited lot!

Those two yet again I remembered today,
When one paid to murder, a Christian in name,
At Parliament's threshold—a sordid display—
At Communist leader Togliatti made aim.
If Comrades Vanzetti and Sacco were there,
They'd know of some way of preventing the shot,
If only by tripping the killer, the plot—
Miscarrying, laying his infamy bare!

. When sure of their living courageousness, I
Misjudged not a feature of those who were killed
Two decades ago by the fiends who were chilled
By thought of the future they feared to descry!
The jury in Boston swept justice aside—
These two they condemned for no crime or offence,
Just so that the Duce some twenty years hence
Would not by Vanzetti and Sacco be tried.

They died in the chair without murmur or sound—
Their foes knew too well that, if living today,
Togliatti to shield from that bullet, a way
Vanzetti and Sacco would surely have found.

.

We, Communists, never forget the enacted—
Let deathmongers quake with fear and dismay—
The passage of time will have nothing detracted
From crime's heavy burden—the killers will pay!
We're still in good health and of vigorous build,
What we won't accomplish —our children will.
They go to school—

there's no forgetting—

Down Kirov Street,

down Voykov Street,

and down the

Sacco-Vanzetti.

A Ballad About Three Soldiers

By an abbey wall, in Italy,
Three Sons Prodigal came up to me.

In the Roman summer's midday bake
Wearing coats of British cut and make.

One could almost think them British soldiers,
Only difference—foreign straps on shoulders

Six embroidered letters, eye compelling,
In the English language Poland spelling

That's so no mistake be made in war
Who is to be driven to the fore.

They surveyed the star that decked my cap,
And the ones upon each shoulder strap,

Furtively looked round, and asked me, flushing.
"Does the Colonel come from Soviet Russia?"

"Where I come from, battle smoke," said I.
"O'er the Vistula beclouds the Polish sky.

"Out near Warsaw, under heavy fire,
We lay crossings nights and days entire.

"And the Poles who fight there have no rakish
'Poland' label stuck on British khaki."

Said one soldier, "How are things back home?"
Said another, "How are things back home?"

And the third, he smiled his heart had spanned
Miles of space to reach his motherland.

"Were you there," said I, "you'd now behold
Groves of linden trees in robes of gold,

"Mothers greeting Poland's sons, a mew
O'er the Vistula's transparent blue."

"But," I added, "this must bore you, rather.
London is your home today. I gather.

“Azure Vistula for rust-red Thames you traded,
For the cliffs of limestone, blanched and faded.”

I spared not their feelings, saw them tense.
Saw their lips go ashen with offence

Said one soldier that no more could he
From his native country severed be.

Said another that the thought had banished
Even sleep from one for Poland famished.

And the third, so deeply was he stirred.
Only touched his heart, but said no word.

Try or no—the generals will fail
To the British cliffs that heart to nail

Thus we stood; an officer passed by,
Staring at the three with yellow eye

They went off, the stare a guarantee
Of a treble round of dutie, for the three.

.

With his generals in Rome the while
Anders was endeavouring to compile

Lists of Poles that he for British gold
Down the river recently had sold—

Men who'd lightly bartered home and creed
In exchange for scanty British feed.

Patiently he counted, finally
Adding to the rest those soldiers three.

Thus a foxy army sergeant's hurried
Wine to draw for men long dead and buried.

.

By ^an abbey wall, in Italy,
Three Sons Prodigal came up to me.

At the bottom of their inmost souls
Three as good as dead (for London) Poles.

Not too late to meet the three one day
Out down Warsaw or down Posen way.

Night Flight

We fly straight across Slovenia,
Cut the front from east to west,
While the nazis in a mania
Move in columns for Triest.

Seen as through a frosty windowpane
Of a house turned upside down.
Just below, a broken mountain chain
Floats with proudly lifted crown.

On the floor, wrapped in a cloak. as though
In the belly of a whale,
I lie prone while we soar up; below,
Clouds sweep by like ships a'sail.

Almost glassy in its iciness,
Night lies frozen, still and calm,
While my wooden pipe's warm kindliness
Thaws the numbness of my palm.

Speech comes hard. We reach an altitude
Where the mercury's fine thread
Freezes, and a sudden lassitude
Fairly turns your tongue to lead.

With a snowfall generosity
Slumber comes; the lack of air
Grips your throat with grim ferocity—
You've got no more breath to spare.

Lucky pilots, in the cabin there,
They've got oxygen along,
Down the tank I hear it run, I'd swear,
Like a soft and crooning song.

I can feel my lips beseechingly
Moving in a mute request
For the tank that so invitingly
Rests upon the pilot's chest.

With a downward surge that suddenly
Sweeps away a tear, we fly
At the lights of nighttime Italy,
At the sea, dark as the sky.

.
.

And in the morning we have tea
With homemade jam and home-
 baked cakes,
And someone in our company
Allusion to the night flight makes.

The crew, it seems, was bound to see
Since just before we started out,
That there was oxygen for three,
So someone would be left without.

It was decided to forbear
From using it throughout the flight;
Each man gave promise then and there
To share with all the common plight.

We laugh it off; no special heed
(A way the Russians have) is paid
The misadventure; all agree
We've profited from mutual aid.

We sit, a cosy family
Out on a country holiday,
A crew of four including me,
Beneath a fragrant lemon spray.

To my two sons one thing I will,
When both of them reach manhood; true,
Not all their mother hopes, but still
A something she would welcome, too.

If life on risky travels sends
My boys, if hazards threaten them,
I wish them this—a wealth of friends
Who will unasked stand up for them.

Who, if my sons together stand
With such a one, in peace or war,
The spirit of the Soviet Land
Will be with them, on any shore.

The kind of friends whose loving care
Is tendered unobtrusively,
Who all your hardships gladly share,
The kind who spent that day with me.

We're far from peace and far from home,
The Black Sea coast is out of reach. . . .
The lazy billows, splashing, comb
The alien Adriatic's beach.

The German

In East Berlin upon a chilly stage,
The German sang—he wounded was in Spain
(Defending the Republic)—just a page
From out a life spent fighting fascism's bane
Five times his friends had mourned him, thought
him dead,
From the Gestapo he had five times fled,
Pursued and hunted, caught, put to the rack,
Then lost again, a needle in a stack.
Unbowed of back or will, returned to life,
Pale, ghostlike, scarred, but calm and confident
He stood, a symbol of relentless strife,
Resistance movement's living document.
And in the heart of a destroyed Berlin
He utterance gave to songs Spain heard him sing,
That had for seven silent years within

His breast been cooped, to these he now
gave wing.

He led the fiends who hunted him a race,
He changed disguises, passports, e'en his gait;
But, holding tight his heart in mute embrace,
The song inside him never did abate.
Chilled to the marrow, husky-voiced, and sore,
It lay in spasms of fever shivering
In lone confinement on a prison floor,
Inured by torture rooms to suffering.
And through the hall resounding, poignant, swift.
It now appeared, for many years unsung.
Some wept to hear it, others dared not lift
Their downcast eyes, by shamed remembrance stung
In silent condemnation over those
Who doomed it to a martyrdom it stood,
And reaching out to friends it saw there, rose
To bind their hearts in close-knit brotherhood.
Dressed in a leather coat and waterproof,
It looked a soldier from the Spanish front;
Of this a pistol was the added proof,
As, too, a Thälmann cap inscribed Rot Front
It almost seemed that he who sang it marched
With heart intrepid to the fore, the song,

By lips emitted, water-thirsty, parched,
A battle breeze blown at the listening throng.

.
And coming home that night, we made our way,
Arms clasped about each other's shoulders, past
Streets, torn and broken, homes that ruined lay
As in the May of Vict'ry when I saw them last.
Like brothers, down the endless graveyard, we.
The German and myself, in silence paced --
Full of belligerence but recently,
The city was today a burnt-out waste.
I sorrowed with him o'er the fact that he,
In prisons rotting, vanquished, desperate,
Could not his native town in 'thirty-three
Save from a nazi-manufactured fate.

Explanation of an Error

France. Paris. The fourteenth of July.
When yesterday Renault and Daladier
Were reinstalled in Parliament, they say
The Right-wing benches in the House well-nigh
Burst with enthusiasm. The centre, too,
Up to the ill-starred Léon Blum and crew.
So much for Parliament last night,
And with the rays of morning light
Down boulevards with warmth aglow
The Communards' descendants flow
The Paris suburbs, St-Denis,
Belleville—a city on the wing;
I stand some steps away and see
The nation's real balloting;
I see the fists raised in salute—

A greeting to Thorez---As one
We stand behind you, resolute.
The Left-wing benches' will be done! -
Down city streets and pavements all
Of Paris marches, grumbling, glum:

“Renault to the wall!”

“Daladier to the wall!”

“And down with Léon Blum!”

Blum? Léon Blum? And through my memory
flashes

Majdanek camp, its long and squalid yard,
The dirt-gray sheds the heaps of rags and ashes,
And for the hundredth time, in simple words
and hard.

The story of the when, the who, the how
Was burned alive---there stands the furnace now!
Then, suddenly, two men close by attest
To having seen Blum here, just when, they don't
remember.

In August last or could it be September....
“What happened later?”---“Burned, like all the
rest.”

I listen. They describe. All facts and pieces
Fit well. My wonderment increases.

"*The Léon Blum?*"—"Yes, that's the name."
"Prime Minister of France?"—"The very same."
And on a knee bent double I adjust
My notebook to inform the press by wire
That Blum is dead. Majdanek. Cinders. Dust.
Gray, livid sky. A thorny maze of wire.

A boisterous sun pricks Paris with its beams,
The brown of chestnuts gold and scarlet staining,
Down city streets suburban Paris streams,
The living Blum, him I thought dead, arraigning.
Naive to credit news of his decease,
For men like Blum are fascism's only lease
On life, its hope of preservation.
Its door into the morrow of a nation.
Well, not a door but, anyway, a chink
That sort has never hovered on the brink
Of death at nazi hands, been burned alive,
Interred in pits, hung, by the thousands, slain;
Unlike us Communists, those others all but thrive
In camps; are kept for future gain;
A sleight of hand -they're ministers again!
They're needed for new Munichs, just in case
Defeat in war lands war fiends in disgrace.

And keeping them in prison for durations
Is but a way to build up reputations.
I couldn't have gone mad, by any chance?—
Believed a crazy lie! Could Hitler ever
Have hit upon a plan a whit more clever
Than this of sending Léon Blum to France?

How fine is Paris when the people throng
Its streets, their stare collective with the force
of fire

The traitor scaring, him who dared conspire
Against their land. He lives, but they are strong.
Down city streets and pavements all
Of Paris marches, grumbling, glum:

“Renault to the wall!”

“Daladier to the wall!”

“And down with Léon Blum!”

*My Friend
Samed Vurgun's Speech
at a London Dinner*

Samed Vurgun left warm Baku
For London's colder climes,
To meet Their Lordships— this at times
A Bolshevik must do;
To see the British Parliament,
Its Right- and Left-wing benches.
And listen in to eloquent
And very numerous speeches
On how in sixteen hundred . . . something . . .
year
The king of England was beheaded here;
How in the centuries that followed bills
were passed

Upholding freedom for the commons. till,
at last,
They all became astonishingly free --
The way we see them now, to this degree --
Free to the point of satiation
Of both M. P.'s and population.

For near a month, with few or no omissions.
In session hours and during intermissions.
Day in, day out-- for what was there to do
We swallowed this impalatable stew.
A parliamentary visit to
Parts' alien wears nerves thin---
They load your brains with lies. and you
Politely take them in.

But when at dinner once, the end
We reached of our endurance,
We asked Samed, our poet friend,
To speak, with this assurance:

"The floor is yours, Samed, by rights.
Be sure to ruin their appetites!"

Confusion sweeps the high-placed public.
A scandal! But... how make a scene?

“What was the gentleman’s republic?”

“He represents in all sixteen.”

“The lot of you.

Is such the case? . . .”

“The lot of us.

Our populace!”

He rose, our comrade from Baku.

Above dress coats, and crystal ware.

And cheeks where drink left tracks of blue,

An heirloom dreaded by the heir:

Above the proudly-seated lords,

Whose praises Kipling sang in rhyme.

Their well-starched collars, stiff as boards,

Inclasping jowls well worn by time;

Above old wine and crested plates.

Above colonial magistrates’

Vermilion necks and silver pates.

Above their stout, bejeweled mates.

Of what they said he caught no word.

Their faces seemed bedimmed and blurred;

His voice, alive with human pride,

Broke through the stillness petrified:

“I have the honour and delight

The mighty Soviet Power

To represent, of which, by right
Of faithful friendship, our
Republic forms a part, all
Of every peaceful nation.”
(To the interpreter: “Please try
To make a close translation.”)
“My land alone among the lands
With rich supplies of oil
Is free of mandates foreign hands
Rob not of wealth its soil;
A land untrampled by your feet.
Unpillaged by your merchant fleet.
Untouched by City machinations.
Unknowing of the rank deceit
Contained in ‘generous’ donations
Of ‘liberty’ to ‘minor’ nations.
A land that holds no gain for you—
That’s free, as you can see—
Politeness bids me offer you
My fullest sympathy.”
So spoke my friend Samed, and I
Their faces watched, whose sluggish peace
Changed to alarm: a smothered cry
Convulsed the features: “Help! Police!”
And then they went a crimson shade.

Broke out in spots in places.
The speech, a mustard plaster laid
Against the burning faces.
To take a gun and shoot the knave.
That's what they'd like to do!
Their Indian lash above him wave-
This poet—from Baku!
To flog him, dull his brains with pain,
As far as they'd be able.
Not be obliged to entertain
The two of us at table -
To listen with a stupid sense
Of idiotic impotence.
And know: no chance will ever come
To hang the man, or strike him dumb.
Or shoot him like the twenty-six
Azerbaijanian Bolsheviks. . . .
Samed speaks on, the wolf pack flaying.
Safe in the keep of workers' hands.
Unconscious that behind him, weighing
His every sentence, Stalin stands.
He stands and listens with a smile --
And seems to find it worth his while.

No!

Five years behind the bars, his term is done.
From out his cell he's beckoned with a gun.

The warden's room. A sheet from Tokio.
Its every line demands a "yes" or "no."
Does he admit the rule of the Mikado
To be divine? And does he hereby swear
To break no law? Show no undue bravado?
His former views in public false declare?

The cherry petals through the window sail
To whisper that a fight's of no avail.
Some India ink, a brush. The trap is set
A weary heart will not avoid the net.

The breath of freedom met with but a shiver.
The fragrant blossoms with a hidden glow,

The self-willed captive writes a stubborn "No!",
The brush held firmly, not a quirk or quiver—
Five years spent here, and five more years to go.

Time marches on, yet nothing's changed: the
 warden,
The prison office, and the cherry trees
Their petals drifting in from street and garden
And settling on your robe of prison frieze.

And just the way you did five years ago
You trace the hieroglyphic meaning "No!"

A fortnight before Victory, unknowing
Of that the war is ending, you again
The warden face, your visage calm, but showing
The weight of years marked by a searing pain.

But though your hair's a cherry-blossom white
In-pitch-black ink that "No!" again you write.

.

I saw Tokuda at a Tokio meeting.
Through fifteen years of prison he had passed.

Great crowds of people rose in stormy greeting
Of this, their leader. back with them at last.
He was reserved and quiet, with a pallor
Of face. stern mouth, resolve in speech and gait,
The coat they'd helped him on with when
his jailer

Was thrust aside before the prison gate.
And round his neck a worker's hand had tied
A worn-out woolen scarf in gentle pride.

Beset by danger. still he did not quail,
Assaulted, fired at, his every foe
He stung with that intrepid No!
No! No! And no! --
As in the fifteen years or so
Spent in the dank seclusion of a Tokio jail.
And death stalked near not through the barbarism
Of someone mad enough to pull the trigger,
But to destroy that word's unshaken vigour.
As though one could extinguish Communism.

Winter Palace in Tokio

I left the place at dawn some time ago;
A tiny village north of Tokio,
In February solitude it lay,
The wintry sky a rain-streaked, sombre gray.

A stroll along the fields by day, at night,
Above some glowing coals that scarce gave light,
Unhurried talk—the singsong ebb and flow
Of peasants' voices, hesitant and slow.

No fine abode the place that harboured me
A paper hieroglyph of poverty,
A miserable symbol of a home
Through which both rain and sun were
free to roam.

Snow, charged with sleet, sprayed sun-starved
fields of rice;

Cut up in even squares the size of dice
By hands taught beggars' ways through want
and dearth.

Lay sodden wet the weary, tearful earth.

My host spoke of this soil, all shredded, torn,
Crawled o'er by many knees, heel trodden, worn,
Tax-strangled, mortgaged, starved, turned gray
and bleak—

All for a cup of rice to last a week.

And he recalled a country where a way
Was found to change all this; would I convey
From all these men (they bowed in homage mute)
To Stalin and to Lenin their salute.

How strong the revolution's surge, the glow
Of its bright flame, when north of Tokio
Great Stalin is beloved, acclaimed, extolled,
And Lenin lives, revered by young and old.

Their copper pipes disgorging rings of smoke,
The peasants sat in silence not one spoke.

And in that moment filled with strange suspense
I, suddenly, with mounting confidence,
Felt there was still a battle dawn in store,
The smoke of cannons, the "Aurora"; more—
That they had yet to seize with calloused hands
The Winter Palace that in Tokio stands!

Naval Base at Maizuru

Maiz'ru Bay. A leaden sky.
Gulls and spinning snow.
Flocks of birds astride the waves
Rocking to and fro.

Rich of echo, crooked, long
Is the narrow bay;
Up its mouth I row as though
Through an alleyway.

Ten times o'er the echo booms,
Rumbling on and on.
Like a busy human life.
Hating to be gone.

Then a silence shrouds the bay,
So intense and still,
One can hear the storm clouds push
Through the waters chill.

Ashen-hued—the sky, the hills -
India ink and chalk.
Sick am I of alien ears,
Sick of alien talk,

Sick of James O'Quisley, spy.
Ever in our way—
Acts the "service pal" to learn
What we have to say.

Laughingly he slaps our backs,
Smiles, and praises our
Cigarettes, and pours at us
Questions by the hour.

Boring pastime ours - to drink
To a people he
"Represents," when we a spy
Know the man to be.

Stupid farce with look naive
To continue thus,
But O'Quisley is our "friend"—
He's "attached" to us.

'Till we sail he'll hound us with
His attentions, and
'Cross the gangplank, much relieved,
Smile and wave his hand.

Maiz'ru Bay. The shrill of birds.
Snow-topped hills of slate.
Masts like lances o'er Japan's
Boats of armour plate;

And a German sub that brought,
When Berlin's defeat
Was at hand, a diplomat
To this far retreat.

Limp as hands on someone's lap,
Lazy waves the vessel slap.

Where. O'Quisley, are you now,
Our good genius, grave

Gatherer of all our views,
Faithful page and slave?

You'd be much surprised to learn—
For no reason I
Came to Maiz'ru Bay that time
Than to see the sky,
Dark and brooding, and the snow,
And the steel-gray sea,
For of Russia, land beloved,
They reminded me.

If you'd known this, you'd not have
Dogged my steps; by far
You'd have had the better time
At the local bar.
But that you've sufficient cause
For alarm is plain—
Communism. I promise you,
Through the world will reign!

Frontline House

A correspondents' club for anchor,
We breathe its air of sweetish rancor,

The Japanese short winter full
Kept in the diplomatic wool

Of those affected alien smiles,
Their lurking hate, their secret wiles,

The honeyed poison and the sting
That alien lips in questions fling;

Within close range for days entire
Of this politely deadly fire.

But in my dreams, an army sack
And rolled-up greatcoat on my back,

I leave the hellhole sorely put
To march around the world on foot.

Like dots and dashes in a line
A gun's rat-tat, the distant whine

Of bullets lead me without fail
To where begins the battle trail,

Where round the world the frontline runs,
A smoke-wreathed path of blazing guns.

It skirts the sea and crosses bridges,
And winds round russet mountain ridges,

Its smoke-infested battle breeze
Steals from behind the Pyrenees.

It cuts through Paris, Paris rouses;
A trench, it circles streets and houses.

Inexorably straight through Rome
It passes, girding wall and dome.

Guerrilla song on lips, it scales
The hills of Greece, its mountain trails.

Now hid from view, lost in a haze,
Now well in sight, aglow, ablaze.

On top, where thunder tanks and bombs,
Below, in dugouts, catacombs.

Through forty lands, for endless miles
To sound of drums and songs it files—

The *Warszawianka*, the *Marseillaise*,
The *Proletariat Unite*—

Now silently for many days,
Now with renewed, resurgent might.

Enduring, though from sight concealed,
It reaches China's stormy field,

Where now a mighty battle's fought,
And where the air's with danger fraught.

I lay my ear against the ground,
Led to the front by way of sound,

Night after night those mountains nearing,
Where sparks flash fire, intense and searing,

And where the living fall to be
Enshrined in immortality;

Allowing death to stall them not,
They make their last post-mortem shot.

Across the China of today
The frontline boldly makes its way,

And like the battle of Moscow, so
It sets my heart with pride aglow.

We hear its loud, insistent boring
Beneath this very house's flooring,

Where all our meals we have and teas
Together with our enemies.

Through luncheons, dinners, invitations,
Through questions, answers, conversations,

The table splitting up in two,
It's always there, whate'er we do—

Now in the guise of correspondent
With moral scruples long abandoned,

Who with a bland, unwinking gaze
Will swear he saw us at Chu Teh's;

And now in that of spying eye,
A listening ear, a brazen lie,

A suitcase under lock and key,
Its contents scattered carelessly.

When some years hence we're asked
the reason
Of hair turned gray—that
winter season,

The frontline sojourn we'll recall,
The correspondents' club and all:

Night Before Immortality

Somewhere on the Java
 cold and still he lay,
On a wet and sultry
 January day.
In the prison courtyard,
 by its wall of cane,
Death he met in silence,
 with a chill disdain;
With the clear-eyed conscience,
 with the raised-up fist,
With the dauntless courage
 of a Communist.
Waiting for the death squad
 in his cell at night,
Land he saw, appavelled
 all in sober white;

Spruce trees white as cotton,
wind-swayed, shivering,
People's tear-streaked faces,
gray with suffering;
Gorki—Russian village,
grief-numbed, petrified,
Where that winter morning
Comrade Lenin died.
With his heart he saw this,
with the heart of one
Who would die that freedom
by his land he won.
Men in distant Russia,
this the youth knew well,
In a song of battle
bade Ilyich farewell.
He knew not their language,
in his own tongue he
Knew: *the Internationale*
spells freedom, unity.
All the night long Lenin
there beside him stood;
Though he spoke no Russian—
Lenin understood.
And when Comrade Lenin,

having all explained,
Passed from out the prison
just as darkness waned.
With a clang of irons
rising from the floor,
He in blood wrote LENIN
by the dungeon door.
This was on the Java.
on a night to be
Followed by a dawn of
immortality—
For the name engraven.
to be seen by all,
On a plate of marble
by the Kremlin wall.
This inside a prison
cell in blood was traced,
Washed away, yet never ~
blemished or effaced....

Red Square

Midnight on the Spassky timepiece. Gratitude
Fills my heart. What bliss, when I have spanned
Many lands and weathered every latitude.
In the centre of the world to stand.

Back for good am I in Moscow finally,
After months abroad. A lasting thrill
By this ancient wall to revel silently
In the starlit night's majestic still.

Not a vision summoned by your memory
In the alien clime of some far place,
But the flagstones underfoot, the shimmery
Moonlight glow, the clock's familiar face;

And the warming surety and confidence
That inside that building with the dome

Stalin is engaged in urgent conference,
In your heart that gladsome feeling—Home!

Little matter that with greater eloquence
Others did their feelings manifest—
Must be that the theme evokes such reverence
That it cannot help but be expressed.

Tapping wall and pavement softly, hazily,
Like the distant click of horses' hoofs,
Like a thousand palms applauding, lazily
Summer rain comes dancing on the roofs

But the sound of footsteps, indivisible
From the gentle patter of the rain,
Comes to me from every land, invisible,
People gather here to shed their pain

We can come by bus; a Kushka resident
Takes a plane—all very much the same,
But these others come from where imprisonment
Threatens those who dare speak Lenin's name;

Where the Mausoleum on a picture card
Keeps plain-clothes-men on their track; and where

Workers' blood dyes scarlet street and boulevard
If aloft our flag to raise they dare;

Where, as in Batavia, the government
Buries them alive; where they are shot,
As in Rome, at threshold of the Parliament,
Where the rights of man are long forgot.

They can't all come here - the thing is evident,
They have work to do - the reason why
Only in their thoughts, alive and eloquent,
Do they meet beneath the Moscow sky.

Thus they live, expectant, full of hopefulness
Far away from all to them akin;
But at midnight, brimming o'er with happiness,
Through the Spas-ky gates their hearts walk in

Maybe this explains why late at night
Kremlin windows shed unflickering light;
Maybe this explains why with our foes
Sternly do we speak, their wiles expose!

Our Song

From sun-flooded steppes to a region
Of ice-coated, snow-bounded seas,
From East Russia's smoke-vested ridges
To West Russia's birch groves and leas—
The world's Greatest Power stands wearing
The laurels of battle for peace,
While labour's accomplishments daring
Its wealth and abundance increase.

Chorus:

Led onward by Stalin's
Ideas immortal,
We live in a land
Of unlimited scope;
Toward sunlight and beauty it opens
its portal,
Of all honest people the stronghold
and hope.

In Rome, on the banks of the Ganges,
In Cairo and London, today
For all of the Peace Army's forces
Our land is the beacon and stay.
We fight against war's spreading fire,
For freedom and justice we stand,
The Peace Movement lead and inspire—
We're men of the great Soviet Land

Chorus:

Led onward by Stalin's
Ideas immortal,
We live in a land
Of unlimited scope;
Toward sunlight and beauty it opens
its portal,
Of all honest people the stronghold
and hope

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